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Articles

Chile: Summer Vacation Politics

Chile's traditional vacation season—the mid-December to early March period when political activity falls off—has temporarily stalled the year-old opposition movement and given the Pinochet government a breathing spell from major protests. Nevertheless, political activity goes on, both above and below the surface. On the opposition side, the terrorist campaign probably will continue, the political and labor opposition will meet to decide on strategies and leadership, and conservative groups will make efforts to consolidate. At least low-level controversies over economic, human rights, and legal issues can be expected. Pinochet, for his part, probably will revamp his cabinet, issue a new law on political parties, and review his government's economic and political programs.

Continuing Terrorist Campaign

The coordinated bombings of electrical pylons near Santiago on 14 December, which briefly cut off power to over half the population, were the most spectacular in a series of recent attacks against power and railway facilities and government personnel. There have been more than 80 bombings, primarily in the Santiago-Valparaiso region, since the beginning of October; six government and police officials were assassinated between 30 August and 14 November. Many of these attacks have been carried out by the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, but some previously unheard of groups—the Revolutionary Front Manuel Rodriguez, the Salvador Allende Brigade, and the Communist Party Frente Cero group—have claimed responsibility for other actions.

We expect some terrorist activities to continue through the summer, as groups attempt to take advantage of the discontent caused by high

unemployment, cutbacks in government-subsidized jobs programs, an unpopular new mining law, allegations of human rights abuses by the government, and the breakdown of talks between the opposition Democratic Alliance and Interior Minister Jarpa.

Opposition Meetings on Strategy and Leadership

The moderate Democratic Alliance is trying to develop a new strategy for this year.

The Alliance is likely to consider a number of important policy questions this summer, including whether Marxist parties will be allowed to play a role, whether it will continue to insist on the resignation of Pinochet, and what type of transitional government and economic reactivation programs to propose. The

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biggest problem the Alliance faces, however, is how to translate dissatisfaction with the Pinochet government - rated at 60 percent in a recent poll by a respected magazine - into effective political pressure. So far, the Alliance has lacked a charismatic leader and a clearly defined platform. Until these are developed, it will be able to capitalize on events, but not force them. [REDACTED]

The Christian Democratic Party will hold a national congress in January to decide its stand on many of the issues facing the Alliance and to prepare for the selection of a new president this spring. The leading contenders are: the current incumbent, Gabriel Valdes; Christian Democratic International President Andres Zaldivar; and party activists Patricio Alwyn and Narciso Irureta. Zaldivar is popular but has largely withdrawn from the competition to remain the International's president and coordinate foreign support. Valdes has been criticized by some party members for his arrogance, but his previous diplomatic experience, international connections, and ability to raise funds are important. Alwyn and Irureta are respected and reported to have considerable support in the party. [REDACTED]

Labor Plans

Leaders of organized labor also plan a number of meetings during the summer. An International Confederation of Free Trade Union's seminar on "Labor Under Pinochet and After" is scheduled to be held in Argentina in mid-January. This conference may help iron out philosophical and personal differences among democratic unions in Chile and help develop international solidarity as well as financial and tactical support. [REDACTED]

In addition, the next few months may clarify the role of labor spokesman Rodolfo Seguel, president of the Chile Copperworkers Confederation and of the National Workers Command—a coalition of the country's five largest labor confederations. His two-year term as Copperworkers Confederation president is scheduled to expire this month, however, subject to a complicated legal and procedural wrangle. [REDACTED]

We believe labor leaders will spend much of the summer discussing how to mount effective protests and debating whether to call a national strike in the spring. They will also have to remedy the organizational problems that hindered the strike in June 1983. [REDACTED]

Government Moves

President Pinochet is also likely to be more politically active than usual this summer. In addition to his traditional tour through the southern sections of the country, he will probably change some cabinet ministers and make some moves to undercut the opposition. [REDACTED]

The government probably will try to reduce support for the opposition by legalizing political parties, a measure that has been under study for some months. Pinochet is likely to try portraying this as only the first of several proposed steps to hasten restoration of civilian rule, in hopes of drawing the opposition into legalistic discussions and away from more active forms of protest. [REDACTED]

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Continuing Issues

Nevertheless, we believe most opposition groups will attempt to keep attention focused on such controversial government policies as:

- The new mining law, which is likely to be opposed by copper union leaders, opposition moderates, leftists, and nationalists who see it as selling out to foreign interests.
- The termination in January of the Minimum Employment Program and cutbacks in the Head of Households Program, which provide benefits to over 100,000 unemployed persons in the Santiago area and 10 percent of the national work force. With unemployment still over 16 percent, even some pro-government businessmen are worried that public works and private industry will not be able to compensate for cancellation of these programs.
- Human rights abuses by the Center for National Intelligence. Chile's Catholic bishops have called for the dismantling of the Center and promised to excommunicate torturers. Following a court decision in November that the Center did not have the legal right to arrest or hold people in undisclosed locations, the government published a list of detention centers but it is preparing new antiterrorist legislation in light of recent attacks on policemen.